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ABSTRACT

Designed to help teachers in writing programs collaborate to reach a consensus on grading standards for freshman essays, the "Buddy System" was instituted on a voluntary basis at a Pennsylvania college with an English department with a traditional literature orientation. To participate, the instructors were required: (1) to choose at least one buddy; (2) to design a writing assignment together; (3) to give this assignment to the classes of all the instructors involved; (4) to determine primary traits together; (5) to choose papers at random; (6) to rank papers by letter grade; (7) to discuss and record distinguishing features as secondary traits; (8) to divide total papers so that each paper would be read by two raters; (9) to discuss papers on which the raters disagreed; and (10) to fill out a form about the process. Eighty-five percent of the faculty participated, including teaching assistants and adjunct and senior faculty. Participants at all levels of experience reported that they all learned about their grading idiosyncracies, and even senior faculty continued to use their "buddies" as consultants in grading questionable papers. Using the "Buddy System" helped to even out grade distribution in the department and reduced the number of students dropping courses taught by "hard" graders. Other benefits are that the program encourages instructors to view writing as a social act and become aware of the legitimacy of different writing styles, and that it encourages faculty at different levels to work together in a non-threatening environment. (SKC)

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The Buddy System:

a step toward more reliable grading

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The Buddy System:
a step toward more reliable grading

As a new WPA in a department of faculty with a traditional literature orientation, I received a departmental mandate to "do something about freshman writing grades which were out of line." The department was concerned because at the end of the previous semester 25% of the sections of the second semester freshman writing course had shown 15% to 29% of their students dropping the course and 21% of the sections of this course had shown 75% or more of their students receiving A's and B's as final grades. The department had concluded that students were dropping out of sections taught by "hard graders" and enrolling in sections taught by "easy graders" at a later date.

When I arrived the department wanted the new director to solve this problem by setting grading standards and by teaching T.A.'s and adjuncts how to grade essays. However, the statistics to which I had access indicated that some adjustments would have to be made by senior faculty as well.

With my own low status and time constraints against me, I looked for a plan which would pose the least threat to all my instructors and yet start a movement toward greater

validity and reliability in grading essays in our freshman writing program.

In response I came up with the "Buddy System" and encouraged participation on a voluntary basis. To participate, instructors had to

choose at least one buddy;
design a writing assignment together;
give this assignment to the classes of all the instructors involved;
determine primary traits together;
choose papers at random;
rank papers A, B, C, D, F;
discuss and record distinguishing features as secondary traits;
divide total papers so that each paper would be read by 2 raters;
discuss papers on which the 2 raters disagreed;
fill out a form and return it to the director.

During the spring semester 85% of our instructors participated. One religious sister past retirement age who taught one section claimed that she "already knew how to grade." The senior professor who initiatd the original mandate "didn't have time," but did exchange some papers informally with the director and called this activity "buddy

grading." The Writing Center director and one of her tutors didn't participate saying they "didn't believe in it."

The T.A.'s worked with the director and a new adjunct, using materials they had received in their graduate course the previous semester: the Lloyd-Jones materials on setting primary and secondary traits and training for correlations (in Cooper and Odell, 1977). Adjuncts who could not conveniently get together with colleagues because they taught at odd times, graded with the director. While this was demanding on the director, it did give her a chance to share department standards and see how these faculty were dealing with grading. Senior faculty chose their own buddies and got started in a minimal-threat environment with a friend. They used materials for providing primary-secondary traits derived from the Lloyd-Jones article and provided by the director.

The T.A. group worked out primary and secondary traits very systematically, recording them in a grid to be distributed to each member. Then they graded in pairs using pluses and minuses as well as whole grades and calculated a mean correlation of .91 for their pairs. In a report to the Academic Standards Committee, Jay Shimek a spokesman for the T.A.'s reported

> I believe that the exercise was very beneficial. . . . This experience showed us the necessity of establishing

> criteria before grading any set of papers. . . . It pointed out to us the different expectations we had in spite of the agreement on the secondary traits. . . . It gave us a chance to see that we had a tendency to grade another teacher's students more strictly than our own.

Speaking for myself and the adjuncts with whom I graded, I have to say we all gained insight. I found that I had to make statements as to what to do with certain anomalies such as a well-written paper which does not respond directly to the assignment. Some teachers were giving automatic F's, some were deducting a certain number of points before grading the quality of the writing, some were grading the paper on the quality of the writing apart from the assignment, and some were asking for rewrites with and without deducting credit. Some adjuncts gained confidence when they saw they correlated with the director. Others had a chance to see that they were grading much higher than the director who had graded and correlated with a number of other graders. One man thought that when I said "This student isn't really saying what he means that I didn't know what the student meant. He would laugh and say, "You didn't know what she meant. I did. Now, look here." Then he would proceed to explain with pride what the student meant.

I did not convince him in one session that the grade should represent the effectiveness of relating meaning to an audience rather than the ability of the rater to figure out meaning. However, when another adjunct who taught with him in a local high school boasted about a high correlation in his grading session, this instructor did take notice. And the printout from the registrar's office at the end of the semester for his class showed a range of grades more similar to that of a typical section than printouts for his sections had shown previously.

Senior faculty who may not have thought they needed to be involved in these grading activities may have participated because they didn't want to be left out. However, in the end many of them continued to consult with their buddies throughout the semester. Some designed tasks together and set grading criteria. Many continued to use their buddies as consultants in grading questionable papers.

Of course, in the process of encouraging instructors to participate in "buddy grading" we did discuss the grade distribution and drop out problem. Recognizing that this would put pressure on instructors to conform to the mean distribution, I asked them to average grades for atleast five sections to determine a mean distribution before comparing and contrasting with the mean for all sections. I

did this to allow for the occasional sections with a high number of strong or weak students.

At the end of the semester, I was able to report that the percent of sections receiving 75% A's and B's had dropped from 21 to 7. I was also able to report that no sections had lost 15 or more percent of its students during the semester. During this one semester fewer instructors had submitted extreme grade distributions than had at the end of the previous semester.

For the future, I have recommended that this department continue to use some form of "buddy grading," making sure to change buddies from semester to semester, mixing adjuncts and T.A.'s with tenured faculty.

I have also recommended that they refine standards for A, B, C, D, and F papers, interpret these criteria, illustrate them with model papers, and describe the qualities of the models in relation to the criteria.

This system is appropriate for departments which have not previously graded together. Its advantages are that

it defuses the threat of working together by allowing instructors to get started with colleagues of their choice;

it offers instructors the convenience of scheduling their own work sessions;

it gets instructors established as co-workers so that

they can continue to check with each other on questionable papers;

it can spill over into buddy testing;

it can grow into group grading at the end of the semester;

it encourages all levels of faculty (T.A.'s, adjuncts, and tenure-track) to work together.

Buddy grading makes certain assumptions about writing and its production in the classroom. It assumes that writing is a social act and that instructors come to the teaching situation with different personality and cognitive styles, different backgrounds and interests, and different expectations.

The first assumption has been discussed in the writing of Edward White (1985, 87); Kenneth Bruffee (1985,2); and Michael Oakshott (1962).

According to White

> Writing [is] a "vehicle" for communication; the main focus is not the written product but the act of communication in a social setting. . . . Writing is seen as a social communicative act, an interactive and inherently meaningful, motivated activity.

Or as Oakshott calls it "the conversation of mankind." In relating this concept to the writing classroom, Bruffee claims

> the teacher represents the larger community of those who write and expect to read standard written English organized usually in certain conventional ways. . . . The teacher tells the class whether or not its consensus differs from the prevailing consensus in that larger community (13).

From this it follows that if the instructor is to represent the larger community, the instructor must be in tune with the larger community: he must know the rules and conventions and he must be sensitive to the assumptions, goals, and values of this community as Bruffee would put it.

Assuming that the instructor comes to the classroom knowing the rules and conventions, "buddy grading" can put him in touch with variations on perspective and interpretation within the community.

The second assumption is being researched by George Jensen and John DiTiberio using the "Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory" and has been discussed by them in College Composition and Communication (October 1984). According to these researchers, a writer's approach to a writing task varies in accordance with that writer's own

personality style. Some writers prefer to free write and others to outline or use some other systematic plan. Some writers use writing heuristically and rewrite extensively and others write with little need for revision. Some have preferences for facts and others for values and relationships. Some want to analyze and others want to express reactions. Some are more interested in conveying a clear message and others in interesting a reader. Some begin with main points and add details whereas others begin with details and then move to main points.

As I pointed out in a paper presented at the Conference for College Composition and Communication in 1986, these composing styles affect the response of readers. They affect their response to the effectiveness of the piece of writing and they affect the suggestions a reader makes for further development. For this reason, I suggested in the 1986 paper that peer response groups be composed of students with complementary composing styles so that each writer could receive response from readers with approaches, interests, and revision needs similar to his own and different from his own.

Now I would like to suggest that instructors with different personalities, composing styles, and reading styles work together. I am recommending this because the

community for which almost any piece of writing is written will consist of members with a variety of styles in these areas. Therefore, an instructor claiming to represent this community will need to interact with colleagues who are not only well-prepared academically, but whose own approaches to a writing task, whose own interests, and whose own revision needs vary.

This interaction should lead to deeper insight into a given piece of writing, feedback which will be beneficial to students with a wider variety of needs, and eventually both greater construct validity and greater reliabilty. Construct validity in composition requires a workable definition of "good" writing (White 185). This workable definition is not easily come by. Writing which works for one reader may not work for another. With "buddy grading" two readers can work together to determine a definition of a working response to a given writing task. With graders agreeing on the criteria for writing which works, consistency in judging various written responses in relation to a given or reliability should follow.

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